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ADULT LITERACY--PROGRESS AND PROBLEMS.

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THE PROBLEMS CONNECTED WITH THE ELIMINATION OF ILLITERACY IN THE UNITED STATES ARE DISCUSSED IN AN EXAMINATION OF ADULT LITERACY TODAY. THE EFFECT WHICH ILLITERACY HAS ON THE ABILITY OF THE INDIVIDUAL TO ACQUIRE AND RETAIN A JOB IS EXPLAINED, AS ARE THE ECONOMIC, PHYSICAL, MENTAL, EMOTIONAL, AND MORAL REPERCUSSIONS OF ILLITERACY. DEFINITIONS OF FUNCTIONAL LITERACY AND ILLITERACY ARE PROVIDED. PAST EFFORTS TO RAISE LITERACY LEVELS ARE REVIEWED--PROGRAMS PROVIDED BY THE MILITARY DURING THE WAR PERIODS, BY INDIVIDUAL STATES (USUALLY BACKED BY INSUFFICIENT FUNDS), AND BY VOLUNTEER GROUPS OF PEOPLE. CURRENT ADULT BASIC EDUCATION PROGRAMS RESULTING FROM THE ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY ACT OF 1964 ARE DESCRIBED, ESPECIALLY THOSE LITERACY PROBLEMS STILL IN EXISTENCE. (LS)

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ADULT LITERACY--PROGRESS AND PROBLEMS

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The problems associated with developing a literate adult citizenry plague the people of the United States as well as people in other countries of the world. The percentage of our adult population who are considered illiterate is much lower in the United States than in many other countries. However, the percentage of adult illiterates in the United States is also higher than it is in some of the foreign countries. The results of the recent census reports indicate that approximately 11 per cent of our adults are illiterate. Regardless of how we compare with other

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countries, in terms of the percentage of illiterates, the problems which are created because of the sizeable number of illiterate adults are staggering in their effect on our economy and the lives of these illiterate individuals.

The undesirable effects of illiteracy are not restricted to the illiterates. Every individual within the society is affected to some extent because illiteracy is closely related to unproductiveness, poverty, disease, and low moral standards. Illiteracy is also responsible for: weakening our nation's security (many young men cannot serve in the Armed Forces), retarding technological progress, reducing our nation's wealth, preventing cultural progress, creating suspicions and superstitions, and retarding world understanding and cooperation (1).

The terms "literacy" and "illiteracy" have many and varied meanings. These different meanings have been established as a result of the different criteria which have been used to determine the literacy level when census reports were taken. However, in the past the term "functional literacy" has generally been used to refer to the development of reading and writing skills comparable to a fifth-grade level of education--determined only by the individual reporting attendance in school to the fifth-grade level. A person with this level of reading and writing skills was considered capable of functioning successfully in our society. At the present time, the term "functional literacy" is used to refer to a person who has acquired the reading and writing skills which are equivalent to an eighth-grade level of education. This is also being determined by the number of years reported in attendance in a school. Everyone is aware that the number of years in school does not truly

represent the level of skill development attained by an individual. In fact, those who are not achieving at a satisfactory level are the ones who tend to be the drop-outs. The change from the fifth-grade level to the eighth-grade level as a criterion for literacy was brought about because of an awareness that it is becoming increasingly more difficult for the individual with less than an eighth-grade level of education to be an effective person in our society--as head of a household, as a citizen, and as a worker.

Automation, brought about by advanced technology, has reduced the demands in our society for unskilled workers. Today, less than five per cent of all jobs are available to the unskilled worker. What will the percentage of unskilled jobs be in the coming years? Many of the jobs which are now manned by unskilled workers will become obsolete in the immediate forthcoming years. A very rapid trend in this direction has been observed during the last two decades. What will these unskilled workers who are incapable of being trained for another job do when they are displaced by automation? Will they be able to support themselves and their families or will they become parasites on our society? The new technology with its rapid and continuous change is demanding constant on-the-job training for most workers to remain abreast of the changes in most occupations. The current prediction that each individual will have to be re-trained three times during his lifetime points to the need for a literate adult citizenry. The unemployment figures indicate that there is not a deficit of available jobs; there is a deficit of trained and qualified personnel to fill these available positions. The development of the basic communicative skills through Adult

Basic Education programs will enable many of the illiterate adults to prepare for another occupation or be trained for the changes in the present occupation or vocation brought about by the new technology.

What efforts have been made in the past to reduce the number of illiterate adults? Very little has been done as a means of reducing or eliminating the vast number of illiterate adults. There have been different periods in which the problem was recognized and some effort, usually minimal and futile, was made to cope with the problem. During war periods the illiteracy problem has received attention because of the high rejection rate of young men who could neither read nor write at a satisfactory level to be inducted into the military service. Some of the borderline cases were inducted and the military provided training in the basic skills for them. In some states the problem of the illiterate adult has been recognized and state programs have been devised to provide for the development of the basic communicative skills. In most instances, the available state funds for such a program have been so meager as to prevent the program from having a resounding impact on eliminating or significantly reducing the number of illiterate adults. Another attack on the problem has been made through volunteer groups. Usually only a very few illiterate adults were involved in these programs and the volunteers were poorly trained to cope with the problems of instruction. The volunteer instructors were relatively uninformed of the characteristics of the illiterate adults and experienced great difficulty in working effectively with them. Effective instructional materials were not available which provided for the sequential development of the basic skills and which were of sufficient interest to the adults.

As a result, many of the adult enrollees dropped out of the program because their needs were not being met. However, the volunteer groups should certainly be commended for they recognized the problems associated with illiteracy and its effect on the individual and society. They attempted to provide a program when professional educators were giving little attention to the problem. The volunteer instructors gave of their own time and money in quest of a solution to an insurmountable problem. All of their efforts were not in vain for many of the adults did significantly improve their basic skills.

What efforts are being made and what programs are there available to the illiterate adult at the present time? At no time in our history has there been such a concerted effort to significantly reduce the number of illiterate adults in the United States as we are currently experiencing. Under the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, any person 18 years of age and older who had not had adequate schooling was offered free schooling to improve their basic skills. During the two year period, 1964-66, \$27,000,000 have been spent to set up adult education classes. In the 1965-66 academic year, there were approximately 373,000 adults who received instruction in the basic skills. For the current year, \$40,000,000 have been authorized (only \$30,000,000 have been appropriated) for Adult Basic Education programs. Of the \$30,000,000 which have been appropriated for the current year, approximately \$3,000,000 to \$6,000,000 are to be available for special experimental and demonstration projects and teacher education. Congress has also authorized \$60,000,000 for the instruction of adults during the 1967-68 academic year.

The number of adults currently enrolled in educational programs and the large appropriations for Adult Basic Education programs present a

rather glowing and encouraging picture of the attack on illiteracy and poverty in the United States. The desirability of these programs and the resulting effects on the illiterate adults attending such programs should not be minimized. However, the surface of the problem has barely been touched. There are currently over 8,000,000 adults twenty-five years of age and older with less than five years of formal schooling and 22,000,000 adults twenty-five years of age and older with less than eight years of formal schooling. Even though instructional programs are being provided in all fifty states, only a limited number of states are instructing a sizeable number of illiterate adults. Three states provided instructional programs for one-third of the 373,000 adults enrolled in classes during the past year. Although there is a difference in the population of different states and a difference in the percentage of the adults within a state who are illiterate the fact remains that some states are not providing a program which will be far-reaching in its effect on the citizens of the state. Less than two per cent of the illiterate adults received instruction in Adult Basic Education programs during the past year. At this rate, approximately fifty-nine years will be required to provide basic skill instruction for illiterate adults twenty-five years of age and older who have less than eight years of schooling. This figure is based on the assumption that each enrollee acquired the skills equivalent to eight years of schooling. Many of the enrollees completed only Level I (skills equivalent to four years of schooling).

The major emphasis in this paper has been on: the progress which has been made; the problems related to such a gigantic endeavor; and

the effect which illiteracy has on the ability of the individual to acquire and retain a job. We need not deceive ourselves by contending that each individual who learns the basic communicative skills will profit in a monetary manner. We must recognize the value to be gained by the individual who will profit only in a self-satisfying manner. The influence which many of the adults will have on their children and grandchildren may be of much greater value in reducing illiteracy than we will ever realize or be able to measure.

Reference

1. "Literacy Education" United States Department of Health, Education and Welfare, Office of Education, Circular No. 376, Washington 25, D.C. June 1953.